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Simplistic Beginnings? The invisibility of sustained shared thinking in OFSTED advice documents

Introduction

In December 2017, a report entitled *Bald Beginnings* (2017) prepared by the early years association TACTYC heavily criticised *Bold Beginnings* (2017), OFSTED's latest bulletin on early years practice. In summary, the main criticisms were that *Bold Beginnings* was 'methodologically obscure' (p.1), lacking in conceptualisation of early years pedagogy and principles of child development, relying instead upon anecdotal data from headteachers. Jarvis and Whitebread (2018), reviewing *Bold Beginnings* in the light of contemporary psychological development evidence, proposed that it constituted 'a sudden and surprising shift in OFSTED's views on the nature of good practice...with misunderstanding evidenced throughout' (p.14).

OFSTED's response to criticisms from TACTYC was to call a meeting with TACTYC and British Association for Early Education representatives to explain their position further. In this meeting, they proposed that *Bold Beginnings* should be seen as 'part of a suite of complementary reports' (p.1) including specifically:

- Are You Ready: Good practice in school readiness (OFSTED 2014)
- Teaching and play in the early years: a balancing act (OFSTED 2015)
- Unknown children: destined for disadvantage (OFSTED 2016)

They commented that '*Bold Beginnings* should be seen as an extension which does not replace or contradict the messages from previous reports' (p.1).

This article will undertake a review of all four reports and consider the overview of early childhood practice that they supply, in particular, how this refers to and utilises psychological and neurobiological findings on human development in the birth to five phase. It will also consider any contradictions between the reports.

Jarvis (2018) proposed that the core problem with *Bold Beginnings* was that it did not acknowledge, or even appear to grasp the concept of 'sustained shared thinking', a pillar of early years practice which is recognised in the DFE Early Years Teacher standards (Standard 2.4 'Lead and model effective strategies to develop and extend children's learning and thinking, including sustained shared thinking' DFE 2013 p.2). This issue will also be considered.

A brief summary of the key areas of child development theory that are relevant to early years practice, illustrating the background to the development of the concept of sustained shared thinking will also be provided.

A summary of theoretical and empirical evidence in psychology and neurobiology

The core human skills are rooted in communication. This requires a child to learn how to independently translate highly abstract thoughts into a complex combination

of symbols which coalesce in spoken language. Zeedyk (2006) proposes this begins with one to one communication between adults and infants involving eye contact and vocalisations, where the turn taking aspect of speech is practiced. She illustrates this by referring to the process as a type of improvised symbolic "dance", which she compares to a "jazz duet" in which each partner responds spontaneously to the other's communication. The point that she is making is that to be truly "intersubjective"; i.e., to be able to communicate our meanings to other people and to grasp their meanings in return, we have to learn that such interactions are spontaneous, with each party-the child and the carer-freely responding to communications from each other. A useful illustration can be found in traditional, improvised jazz; here it is obvious that in order to "jam", you have to first learn how to tune into shared rhythms.

In this way, the infant becomes increasingly adept at effectively responding to and initiating communications with others. The process of environmentally "booting" such a vital species-specific system is not peculiar to human beings; it is also observed in other animals. The associative play activities of other mammalian species build neuronal connections in the amygdala and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex of the brain which deal with emotion regulation and social skills (Pellis and Pellis 2012). There is no logical reason why humans, as evolved mammals themselves, should be radically different.

Jean Piaget was the first theorist to produce a comprehensive theory of human intellectual development. In *The Psychology of the Child* (Piaget and Inhelder 1969) he outlined his theory that children learn in interaction with the concrete world (i.e. world of objects), with experiential learning underpinning the child's construction of a cognitive network of schemas, co-ordinated clusters of knowledge, in which children understand new material in the context of what is previously understood, developing new clusters in turn.

The Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed that where such interactions include linguistic exchange, particularly between a child and an adult or a more able peer, the construction of understanding would be enhanced, taking a child one step further in their learning than they were able to move alone (Vygotsky 1978). He referred to the area into which a child could be led as a 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). Jerome Bruner, who brought Vygotsky's work to the attention of the West, proposed that the adult's ongoing role in a teaching and learning process is to progressively *scaffold* the child's learning at an appropriate level, i.e. within the ever-progressing ZPD (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976). Building on this point, Wood and Middleton (1975) proposed that the best way adults can help children learn is by creating a contingency, by consciously tailoring adult input on a minute-to-minute basis so it is always contingent to the child's learning (i.e. supporting the child into the constantly progressing zone of proximal development)

Much later neurobiological research discovered that in the first three years of life, synapses- connections between neurons in the brain- are formed at a faster rate than at any other life stage, constructed through interactions the child undertakes both with the concrete environment and with other people. This 'blooming' phase is then followed by a 'pruning' phase up to the sixth year of life as surplus connections are eliminated, honing more streamlined cognitive representations of the concrete

and social environment, rooted in more prolific patterns of experience (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2017 online). As this early childhood neuronal connection program unfolds, children's ability to organize thought exponentially increases, as does the ability to focus attention without becoming distracted by the intrusion of non-relevant thoughts; the development of 'inhibitory behaviour' (Abbott and Burkitt 2015). In August 2018, the process of reciprocal conversation between children and adults was pinpointed as strengthening the synaptic connections in the language areas of the brain:

The development of dorsal language tracts is environmentally influenced, specifically by early, dialogic interaction. Furthermore, these findings raise the possibility that early intervention programs aiming to ameliorate disadvantages in development...may focus on increasing children's conversational exposure in order to capitalize on the early neural plasticity underlying cognitive development

(Romeo et al 2018, online).

The gradual construction of knowledge and understanding within the developing human brain through interaction with both other people and the concrete world is therefore strongly supported by both psychological and neurobiological research. David Whitebread proposes that the evidence that we currently have on the early childhood development phase, lasting until approximately the seventh birthday indicates that adults following children's interests, rather than attempting to transmit information from the perspective of an adult agenda, creates a far more supportive environment for generic intellectual development (Whitebread and Bingham 2011, Whitebread 2017). The key point is that the younger the child and the less mature his/ her language skills, the harder s/he will find it to manage incoming information, particularly when it does not sufficiently relate to any existing concept stored within the memory. An analogy that I have previously used is that it is far easier to find something in a tidy wardrobe with all the clothes hanging neatly on hangers than jumbled in a muddle at the bottom. The more developed the neuronal network into which an idea is introduced, the more 'hangers' potentially available to which it may attach. Attempting to 'cram' more and more new information will inevitably end in confusion (Jarvis 2017). The clear indication is that when we are trying to teach things to children in this phase of development, it is best to start from their current context of understanding rather than attempting to impose an entirely alien agenda upon the process.

Vygotsky's concept of the 'zone of proximal development' was later co-opted by Barbara Rogoff in her concept of 'guided participation', which described the type of interactions that naturally occur between parents and children in domestic chores (Rogoff 1993). In this situation, the agenda emerges naturally for the child from his/her immersion in everyday domestic life. Iram Siraj then drew upon both Vygotsky and Rogoff to explain how adults could most sensitively work with children in professional early years settings: by tuning into the child's interests and 'everyday' experiences to expand his/her thinking through careful dialogue. She dubbed this process 'sustained shared thinking' (SST):

An episode in which two or more individuals "work together" in an intellectual

way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend.

Siraj-Blatchford et al., (DfES 2002, p.9)

In this way, then, contemporary early years practice draws upon nearly a century of research findings which dovetail to give us a reasonably cohesive picture of how human beings learn and develop in early childhood. But how has OFSTED incorporated this in its practice-focused literature over the last five years?

OFSTED and the early years: Themes in the suite of documents

The first, overarching point that should be made is that none of these documents refer to SST by name. It is also quite clear that there was a major shift in thinking about early years in *Bold Beginnings*, which does not appear, as was asserted by OFSTED, to constitute a continuation of the other three. There are however some similarities between concepts presented in *Are You Ready: Good practice in school readiness* (AYR), *Teaching and play in the early years: a balancing act* (T&P) and *Unknown children: destined for disadvantage* (UC), particularly between the first two.

Theme 1: Teaching and play are not separate

This was a strong theme running through both AYR and T&P. T&P refers to teaching and play as a 'false dichotomy' proposing that teachers 'saw their approaches to teaching and play as sitting on a continuum' (p.5). There is a rather cryptic reference to unnamed others having 'long held beliefs about teaching and play' in opposition to the continuum construct and that 'the danger of allowing them to continue [in these beliefs] is all too real' (p.6). On p.10 T&P, it is suggested that early years staff, non-QTS in particular construct 'teaching' quite narrowly as 'passing knowledge through direct instruction.' The 'danger' referred to on p.6 is however not fully articulated. There is a hint of how the problem may be constructed by the authors on p.8: 'a fixed, traditional view of teaching will not suffice' and then again on p.11: 'teaching should not be taken to imply a top down or formal way of working'. AYR echoes and further clarifies this construction: 'direct teaching should not be taken to imply a certain style of teaching, it is a broad term'. However the text then moves on to discuss 'adult led sessions' without referring to a continuum which starts from one end with entirely free play, through SST to adult directed learning on the opposite pole. It therefore appears that whoever wrote the report lacked a detailed understanding of the early years teaching and learning continuum.

Theme 2: A potential deficit model?

This theme was the only one shared between UC and the other two documents. UC refers to 'deficits in children's experiences at home' (p32), and the need to give disadvantaged children 'time to be both physically and intellectually active' (p.33). AYR refers to disadvantaged children needing 'more child initiated play based provision with additional adults to communicate and interact with'. This would seem to be an ideal place at which to introduce the concept of 'SST' and to explain more fully what is actually happening in such interactions, but this was absent from the

narrative. When it comes to role play, the authors of AYR see adults engaging in role play as 'pointing children to appropriate practice' (p.17), in particular with regard to vocabulary. On p.19 the authors refer to disadvantaged children as 'not ready to play' and that it was necessary for adults to show such children 'how to use equipment' and point to older children as models (p.21). On p.23 it is proposed that 'staff need to teach disadvantaged children how to play'. Overall, the construction of children's play in this respect seems to be something that is more rooted in adult direction than the initiation of reciprocal dialogue.

This is further illustrated in T&P's reflection on the role of the adult:

Communicating and modelling language, showing, explaining, demonstrating, exploring ideas, encouraging, questioning, recalling, providing a narrative for what they are doing, facilitating and setting challenges... Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do as well as take account of their interests and dispositions to learning' (p.10).

In this sense then, adult interaction in child directed activity is not constructed as reciprocal dialogue in the sense of a 'jazz dance', but as a process of instruction in which the child's orientation to the activity is principally of interest to the adult for the purpose of assessment. It could be argued that this is in essence a deficit model, constructing the child's participation as that of a very unequal partner which becomes even more pronounced when s/he is from a background of socio-economic disadvantage.

Theme 3: Issues with terminology

This theme is clearly marked by the comment by the T&P authors in their assertion that 'leaders were creating their own shared language to describe a range of approaches' (p.14), when in fact most of the language reported is frequently found within the early years literature, for example the terms "adult led" and "child initiated" which the T&P authors over-generalise as 'alternatives to teaching and play respectively' (p.9). On p.11 they correspondingly propose that teaching is adult-led while 'child initiated activity is rooted in play'. Here free play seems to be very much the model for play in general, but on p.12 there is a reference to a difference between 'planned and child initiated play', which is repeated in AYR p.19. In T&P p.28 a surprising and far-reaching conclusion is drawn: 'the children's experiences in the very best settings [were] more adult led than balanced...we observed anything from 60%-100% of the child's day being supported by adults.' Observation evidence is reported on p.21, that in an outstanding school 'staff constantly played alongside the children'. However there is no indication of what the adults were *doing* in such interactions, whether they were leading in interactions with children or engaging in SST. Overall, there appears to be misunderstanding underpinned by theoretical naivety, in particular a very shallow understanding of the continuum of play causing the authors to presume that all adult-child interaction in early years settings is inevitably 'adult led'; a significant misinterpretation of the evidence.

Theme 4: A passion for play

This is a strong theme in T&P. On p.10 the reader is told that the significance of play

‘in allowing children to...develop has long been understood.’ The value of play is effusively celebrated on p.8:

The significance of play in allowing children to learn and develop across such a broad range of developmental areas has long been understood. Its fundamental value is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage....Play provides the natural, imaginative and motivating contexts for children to learn about themselves, one another and the world around them. A single moment of sustained play can afford children many developmental experiences at once, covering multiple areas of learning and reinforcing the characteristics of effective learning.

Early years practitioners’ passion for play is subsequently explicitly referred to twice, once in the sense of its general importance on p.9: ‘every opportunity to play...has a purpose’ and again on p.14 in the sense of practitioners’ passionate belief that the type of play they were describing to inspectors was not simplistic in nature. They were ‘confident to use the overarching term teaching to explain...varied approaches to learning and play’. In AYR, engaging parents and carers in play is reported as ‘evidence of good practice’ that was seen ‘mainly through children’s centres’ (p.5). Overall however, the reader intuits that the writers do not fully share this passion, which breaks through in comments that they would expect to see a ‘shift to more adult-led activities as children grow older’ (p.21 T&P) and ‘increasing provision of direct teaching over [the Reception] year’ (p.24 AYR). Yet again, there is no hint of practice on a continuum from free play through SST to adult direction, which again suggests that SST was a concept entirely missing from the authors’ professional and theoretical repertoires.

Enter Bold Beginnings

Bold Beginnings (BB) is a very different document to the other three in style, and shares less generic content. It should be noted here that BB is focused entirely on Reception as opposed to the other documents which refer to practice in other stages of the EYFS, some of which takes place in non-school settings. The difference in tone is extremely marked, for example: ‘head teachers know which aspects of learning needed to be taught directly and which could be learned through play’ (BB p.5) offering a stark contrast to the blurred boundaries between teaching and play depicted in T&P and AYR. ‘Play was used primarily for developing children’s personal, social and emotional skills’ appears to place play in a rigidly defined context that was not in evidence in the other documents. BB firmly categorises children’s activities as ‘whole class, small group, partner work, teaching and play’, proposing that ‘leaders and staff were clear about the purpose of play and understood its place in curriculum’ (p.5). Again, SST does not receive a reference. The role of educational games is referred to as ‘playful teaching’ in which ‘children are at risk of losing value if an adult is not present’, giving the example of a maths game, and of modeling language in role play (p.17). Adults are depicted as teaching children *how* to play. While this does permeate through to some extent in the other documents, outlined in the deficit model theme above, it is far less emphatic than the narrative of BB.

BB additionally contains some hostile references to play that are entirely missing from the other documents. On p.16 we are informed that some Head Teachers saw the notion of free play as 'rosy and unrealistic' because 'adults have always imposed boundaries, e.g. when to be home and where children could go' and that some leaders 'did not endorse free-flow'. This is an apparently incongruous linkage, but it becomes apparent that the term 'free play' is being muddled with the term 'free flow play' as the section moves on into a consideration of children's freedom to move between the indoor and outdoor environment, which appears to be the authors' understanding of what is meant by 'free flow play'. However, Tina Bruce's original definition of free flow play, reiterated in the original Early Years Foundation Stage materials was play in any location(s) which 'is coordinated, moves fluidly from one phase or scenario to the next' (CWDC 2007, online).

Finally, tutors in Initial Teacher Education are strongly criticised as damaging the importance of reading, writing and maths for under fives 'in favour of play-based pedagogy and child initiated learning [which]... prevented effective progression into year 1' p.29., a brief but quite baffling and unevicenced attack.

Conclusion

This review of the literature supports the analysis of BB that I initially outlined in my blog 'Child Development: the Invisible Man':

The pivotal role of SST in the early years environment is to introduce young children to school as a place in which teaching and learning is, above all, a meaningful process. As such its omission from a document that 'aims to provide fresh insight' (Bold Beginnings, p.2) into early years education is extremely worrying. SST's focus on meeting the child where s/he is 'at' is inclusive to all, guarding against children's first experiences of school being tainted by the toxic cascade of bafflement, boredom and failure. Disillusionment at this early stage leads to later resistance to traditional adult-directed pedagogy that is most efficient in communicating the contents of a body of knowledge to learners over seven, and to a lack of confidence to engage in...independence and creativity.

Jarvis (2018, online)

This review has also indicated that similar misunderstandings were present in earlier documents produced by OFSTED, and have subsequently been compounded by BB's more strident criticisms of practice in England's Reception classes.

The empirical research, including very recent neurobiological findings, strongly supports the pivotal importance of reciprocal conversations between adults and children under 7, rather than dominance and firm direction. As such, it is suggested that OFSTED might usefully produce a further document that specifically reflects upon the role of SST in early years practice, in particular how it is designed to nurture the development of human minds at such an early stage of the life-journey.

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